**Using Teaching as Inquiry to improve student outcomes**

**By Claire Amos**

*“All schools need to do a couple of things – they need to design and implement a school curriculum and they need to teach using an evidence based inquiry cycle that informs what they do and monitors the impact of those decisions.” - Chris Arcus (NZC Curriculum Manager)*

When asked what schools needed to have in place (as part of NZC implementation) by February 2010, Chris Arcus stated that we needed to teach using an evidence based inquiry cycle. So what is Teaching as inquiry?

Teaching as inquiry is really about asking:

* what is important and worth teaching?
* what are the student’s current strengths, needs and experiences?
* what approaches and strategies are the best routes to developing specific skills, concepts or attitudes?
* what happened as a result, how do we know, and therefore what are the next steps for teaching and learning?

This message is reinforced in the NZC (pg.35). ‘Since any teaching strategy works differently in different contexts for different students, effective pedagogy requires that teachers inquire into the impact of their teaching on their students.

Inquiry into the teaching–learning relationship can be visualised as a cyclical process that goes on moment by moment (as teaching takes place), day by day, and over the longer term.’

On one level, answering these questions seems simple, and there is no doubt that inquiry and evidence should indeed inform our practice. But where do we start? Ideally, as stated in the NZC, we should be using Teaching as Inquiry to inform all of our teaching – our programmes, all of our units and each lesson we deliver. Well and good, but if this is a new approach for us and if we are to adopt Teaching as Inquiry in an authentic way, we might need to start by doing something more manageable. The reality is there are always things we can improve; programmes, units and strategies we can change for the better. I suggest starting the inquiry process by focusing on one class, one group of students, that way you can take the time to genuinely discover your students’ strengths, needs, and experiences. Make sure you reflect on your own strengths and weaknesses as well! It is important that this is then acted upon by devising and action plan and timeline. Below I have outlined a process and a series of questions that a teacher could use to guide them through a teaching as inquiry project in order to improve student outcomes for specific class or student group.

*'If there is a way to do it better... find it!' Thomas Edison*

The Teaching as Inquiry cycle can guide us in finding out what we need to know about our students and to inform our teaching and learning. This version of the model identifies six stages of an inquiry cycle. There are different skills and tools that are useful at each stage. The model is designed to guide you through the steps of your own Teaching as Inquiry project. In the right colums you will see examples of how this might be used with a Junior and a Senior English class.

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| **Step** | **Description** | **Possible Actions/ Questions** | **Junior Example** | **Senior Example** |
| **Focusing**  **Inquiry** | You find out what you need to do, and pose questions for yourself. What group/class am I going to focus on? How am I going to decide what to prioritise. | * Which group do I want to focus on? * How do I measure/reflect on my own areas of strength and weakness? * How do I best measure where my students and/or staff are at right now? | **Year 10 English**  Possible means of measuring: AsTTle results, formative writing assessment, their Year 9 results, interviews, surveys, pretesting? | **Year 13 English**  Possible means of measuring: my 2009 results, their 2009 Y12 results and papers, interviewing, discussion, survey, 3.5 pre-test. |
| **Focusing**  **Inquiry** | You plan how you will find out what you need to know, whether it be data collection from testing, reading past exams, interviews or surveying your students. | * Analysing your classes past NCEA results * Gathering your present group’s results from 2009 * Gather your classes past AsTTle results * Conducting pre-tests or formative assessments * Interviewing students/staff * Assessing their learning styles e.g. using VARK * Gathering and assessing student’s past papers. | **I have chosen to use the following means to collect data:**   * Look at my Year 10 results for 2009 * AsTTle results from 2009 * Do a range of formative tests using ARBS resources. * Conduct a survey about student interests, experience etc | **I have chosen to use the following means to collect data:**   * my 2009 results, * their 2009 Y12 results * discussion * 3.5 pre-test |
| **Teaching Inquiry** | Processing your data, identifying needs and opportunities. Looking for patterns and trends. From this you need to make decisions about how to best meet the needs of your students. | * Processing and working out what your findings mean; looking for areas of need in terms of your teaching and your students learning. * Identify 2-3 areas to focus on. * Taking your findings and creating an action plan around your foci. * Choosing a range of students who you might track. | **After looking at the data I have identified the following areas to focus on:**   * Improving spelling * Improving reading comprehension * Improving structure and fluency of literary essays | **After looking at the data I have identified the following areas to focus on:**   * 3.5 skills * A new Shakespeare unit * Student time writing skills |
| **Teaching and Learning** | Taking your findings from your data analysis and creating **resources** and developing **teaching strategies** to meet the needs of you and your students.  **At this point develop your Action Plan and Timeline!** | * Seeking and participating in the professional development to meet your needs. * Looking at your year planner to ensure you are allowing time to address the topics or skills that you are focusing on. * Finding and developing resources to support the teaching of these topics and skill sets. * Looking at ways to support and extend students e.g. three level guides, aiming for excellence, developing a class page on Moodle, etc. | **Spelling –** Research effective strategies for improving spelling and create a trial program for Term 2.  **Reading Comprehension –** Create weekly Reading Comprehension Tests for each text studied and a range of texts (from ARBs)  **Essays –** Discuss with other teachers their essay teaching strategies, gather resources and create a series of essay and paragraph writing scaffolds.  Look at my planner and work out how these will fit in! | **3.5 –** Research key strategies that students need to succeed. Create 3.5 style questions for each text studied and gather enough 3.5 tasks for fortnightly formative assessments.  **Shakespeare Unit –** Creating an Othello unit, gathering support material to include on class wiki and locate specific Othello exemplar essays.  **Student timed writing –** Creating resources to support a fortnightly (alternating with 3.5) time essay slot in class programme. |
| **Teaching and Learning** | Implementing your resources and teaching strategies into your classroom teaching. | * Teaching the topic and/or skill set * Using developed resources to improve learning outcomes * Using effective pedagogies * Observing teachers and being observed | Run spelling program in Term 2  Implement a Friday routine of Reading Comprehension that is peer assessed.  Teaching essay writing using new scaffolds and exemplars as they come up in each unit. | Run fortnightly 3.5 formative assessments.  Deliver new and improved Shakespeare Unit in Term 2!  Run fortnightly timed essay writing slots. |
| **Learning Inquiry** | At each stage you need to think about how you are doing— Are you finding answers? Do you need more information? What is going well? What can you do better? | * How do I measure if improvements have been made? * Conductive formative assessments * Interviewing students * Reflecting on results of starting point, midpoint and endpoint data * Getting colleagues to come and observe your teaching and feedback.   At every stage of the inquiry process you will need to reflect on what you are doing. You might consider:   * Do I have enough information about my students? * Do I need support, feedback or guidance at this stage? * Am I sticking to my action plan? * Is my action plan realistic and/or meeting my desired outcome? I.e. improving student engagement and achievement?? | Repeat formative spelling test given in Term one in Term Four to measure value added.  Look at Term 4 AsTTle results to measure possible improvements in Reading Comprehension.  Gather a portfolio of student writing from throughout the year to look for improvements made with essay writing or to address any areas of concern.  **Regular self-reflection:**   * Do I have enough information about my students? * Do I need support, feedback or guidance at this stage? * Am I sticking to my action plan? * Is my action plan realistic and/or meeting my desired outcome? I.e. improving student engagement and achievement?? | Recording and tracking 3.5 results looking for areas of need and areas of improvements  Interviewing students about how they feel about the Shakespeare unit throughout and after unit is completed. Assessing formative essays.  Recording and tracking results and length of timed essays looking for areas of need and areas of improvement.  **Regular self-reflection:**   * Do I have enough information about my students? * Do I need support, feedback or guidance at this stage? * Am I sticking to my action plan? * Is my action plan realistic and/or meeting my desired outcome? I.e. improving student engagement and achievement?? |